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AUTHOR Lee, W. R.
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ABSTRACT

EFL (English as a foreign language) and ESL (English as a second language) are taught in various types of learning environments. In considering types of learning success, the learning environment must be kept in mind. The typical immigrant (a second language learner) has to cope with "difficult" English almost immediately, and is judged by his ability to communicate with native speakers of English. In a learning environment where English is not spoken outside the school, opportunities for learning are fewer, but no such demand is made: a learner's success is not judged in terms of his ability to communicate with native English-speaking people. Often, in a foreign-language learning environment, the basic course is too short for an advanced level to be reached, and a high proportion of learners do not continue. An appropriate teaching goal here is ability to use English as an instrument of communication with non-native rather than native speakers. A reduced form of English needs to be defined for this purpose. Simplification should consist mainly of not teaching syntax usually taught such as question tags, future perfect, and "shall" in addition to "will." (Author/CFM)

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Types of Success in Foreign-Language Teaching: English as a Lingua Franca

W. R. Lee

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What I am going to say is in part so obvious that many may think it hardly needs to be said, while in part it is not obvious at all, so that others will find it difficult to agree with. It is occasionally good, I think, to re-state the obvious; and as for the rest, I believe there are points here worth discussing. The view put forward is by no means a popular one at present, but the argument I advance, which is not new, may deserve closer attention than it usually receives.

An obvious first point - English as a foreign or second language is taught in <u>various</u> common types of learning environment, ranging from one in which the language is heard and seen on all sides outside the classroom and school - in the streets and shops, on the buses, on the radio and TV, at the post office, and so on. This is an environment in which there are frequent and numerous opportunities of <u>using</u> the language - an environment in which the learner often also <u>needs</u> to use it. At the other extreme we have a learning environment in which the language is rarely or never heard or seen outside the classroom and seldom <u>in</u> the classroom (possibly only twice a week), and this is an environment in which there are few or no opportunities of using the language except in the language-class itself - an environment in which there is no compelling <u>need</u> to use the language except in so far as the lesson activities themselves call for it. There may not, in this type of learning environment, be any compelling need to use the new language until years and years later, if at all.

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Of course, there are various types of learning environment in between these two extremes - one in which, for example, although the learners do not meet with the language every day outside the school, they can hear it and find it being used not very far away geographically, so that now and then they can go to where it is commonly spoken, and can also hear it very readily and frequently on the radio and even the TV. It is this

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type of foreign-language learning environment with which the Council of Europe team led by J.L.M.Trim has been predominantly concerned. Another 'intermediate' type of learning environment is that in which the learners, while not finding the language in general use in the community to which they belong, do meet with it regularly at their place of work, perhaps in answering telephone calls from abroad, reading and translating letters, and so on; but this is a type of learning environment which concerns only adults.

In thinking about types of success in language learning, we have constantly to bear in mind the type of environment in which the learning is carried on. We have also to bear in mind differences of age - not simply the distinction between 'child' and 'adult' (this is too crude a distinction) but differences between younger children and older children, and between younger adults (say 15-18-year-olds) and older adults. Furthermore, we must distinguish between types of purpose (both the teacher's and the learner's). I shall not go into all these points just now.

What is considered to be success in one type of learning environment or for one type of learner may be looked upon as failure in another type of learning environment or for another type of learner. This is perhaps obvious point No.2, but one that is not all that obvious and is not very often discussed.

Let us take a closer look at some of the types of learning environment I have mentioned.

Firstly, the typical immigrant's environment:

The child goes to school and has to cope with his classroom education in a new linguistic medium - let us say English. Normally all the teaching will be in English except where enlightened educational authorities have managed to provide some of it in the immigrant's own language - not by any means possible everywhere. But immigrant children must learn to cope not only with a range of school subjects and

activities taught by teachers who may have little understanding of their language difficulties and little ability to simplify the English they use, but also with English-speaking fellow-pupils in the playground and street. These of course may not be speakers of English as a native language. They may indeed speak in a variety of styles and accents, influenced by the various parts of the world from which they come (and also by the parts of the new country to which they go). English, like other widespread languages, is often useful outside its use as a means of communicating with those who speak it as a first language.

A great deal is expected of the immigrant language-learner: and whatever encouraging pats on the back in the special language-class he or she may be given by a wise and sympathetic teacher, elsewhere it is rather a matter of sink or swim, and for a long time it will often be 'sink'. Broadly speaking, the immigrant learner will be seen as a failure or as an incomplete success (by himself as well as by other people) in so far as he fails to communicate in his daily circumstances - that is to say, fails to communicate with fluent speakers of English and also with others who speak in an unfamiliar way. An immigrant's initial incompetence shows up vividly, and at once, in an environment where very many can use the language more competently than he. The yardstick is the linguistic performance (and also competence in the Chomskyan sense) of other people who have been much longer on the scene.

It is no great exaggeration to say that the immigrant is up against the whole English language as spoken in the place to which he goes — differing styles of pronunciation, a wide range of registers, a tremendous mass of vocabulary and a great complexity of syntax - in the playground, the amusement arcade, the streets, and on radio and TV. And failures of communication may be serious - for instance, he may choose a bus going in the wrong direction, get something unwanted at the grocers, be given the wrong railway-ticket, be misdirected on the way to the civic centre, and so on.

Contrast a learning situation at the opposite pole—where the learner hears and sees, outside the classroom lesson-periods, which may not even

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be daily ones, almost nothing of the language he is trying to acquire. Opportunities of learning are fewer, but linguistically the environment is less demanding. The learners escape from the language every time they leave the classroom, and it pursues them only in the guise of homework. They do not have to summon up their courage and syntax every time they go shopping or visit the civic centre or the swimming pool or ring up the TV repair shop, becuase they don't take the foreign language with them when they do these things; they take the mother tongue. Children do not need any grasp of the English tense system to explain the accident they were involved in on the way to school - though the conscientious teacher of English will doubtless prefer to have the explanation in English. Adults do not need the foreign language to tell the TV rental firm that they cannot pay their rent; they will make this dire confession in their own. Relatively little is expected of the foreign-language learner, and usually (except from an intermediate level onwards) nothing outside the syllabus and the textbook course (which may, one cannot deny, be good ones). The learners have not been thrown in at the deep end, and I am not suggesting at all that they could or should be. What is meant by success in this type of teaching/learning environment? It means the accomplishment of tasks set by the teacher and the syllabus, or perhaps by the learners themselves. Nobody regards as unsuccessful an elementary or even an intermediate learner in this type of environment who cannot understand English people talking among themselves, who cannot readily follow typical discussion programmes on the BBC home service, who would have considerable difficulty shopping in Queen Street, or who could not understand and argue with any of the considerable variety of visitors who knock uninvited at our domestic doors. Even those learners who are called 'advanced' because they are more advanced than those called 'intermediate', and even those students who pass genuinely advanced examinations in English as a foreign language, sometimes cannot do such things. Success in one learning environment is not necessarily success in another. There are differing types of success. Success in a second--language learning environment calls for a very high degree of oral skill, both receptive and productive, and for the ability to cope with several varieties and styles of English: and this success is demanded at an early

stage. In a foreign-language learning environment it is not demanded at an early stage, and may not be demanded at all: what is demanded is something different, and I shall say a little more about this in a minute.

A brief word about one of the other learning environments I mentioned - what may loosely (perhaps far too loosely) be called the 'European' language-learning environment, with which the Council of Europe has mainly concerned itself. The assumption is that the peoples of Europe, in their work and leisure, will continue increasingly to mix with one another and will need to learn one another's languages more and more, and especially certain of the widespread languages. It seems a reasonable assumption, but there is a difference between learning a language in a country where everybody speaks it and learning it where relatively few people speak it, even if the country where everybody speaks it is close at hand. There is not the same daily obligation to use the language for practical needs, not the same daily pressure on the learner, not the same demand from his environment for successful communication at a fairly advanced level. The goal can be approached more gradually and no doubt with less tension, although the goal is similar; namely the ability to communicate with native and other highly fluent speakers of the language.

In a second-language learning environment success is not promoted entirely, or even perhaps chiefly, by the number and frequency of the language-lessons given at school or institute: a great deal of the learning takes place outside these and much depends on extra-curricular incentives and opportunities. In what I've called the 'European' language-learning environment the same applies to a much lesser extent; for example, school-age learners of English may be able to take part in school visits to Britain. But in a foreign-language learning environment the number of language-lessons or what goes on in them matters a great deal, since there is little language-learning otherwise.

Now the number of language-lessons is never enough to suit the

teacher; but it is more to the point of my present argument that they are not nearly enough for a high level of achievement to be reached. This is known to be so, and yet there is sometimes a kind of reluctance to admit it, and there is certainly a refusal to draw the necessary conclusions. Often there is no possibility, owing to the claims of other elements of the curriculum and doubtless for other reasons too, of substantially increasing (in particular types of school) the amount of time devoted to foreign-language teaching; and where sometimes there is a possibility there may be no likelihood of this happening. We must recognise another important fact at the same time: that in this type of learning environment, as to some extent in the 'European' one, the majority of school-age language-learners, not to mention older learners, do not pursue their language-learning beyond the end of the initial basic course. For them that is all. Inevitably - in average circumstances, with some two to four or five periods of learning a week for, say, three or four years (the provision varies considerably, and some have less than that) - they fall short, and by a long way, of a level of achievement at which they can easily communicate with native speakers and others very fluent in the language. Have they wasted their time, and has the teacher's time been wasted? Possibly not. But to make sure that time has not been wasted in these circumstances it seems necessary to define the goals of the teaching rather carefully and to adopt reasonable criteria of success. (Incidentally, is difficulty in communication between native and non-native speakers always to be 'blamed' on the non-native speakers? How good at communicating are many native speakers, except among themselves? They cannot simplify, and sometimes do not want to.)

If it is true that in the basic course, which is usually a basic school course, a level of achievement cannot be reached (mainly through lack of time) at which easy communication with native speakers of the language is possible, and if it is also a fact that large numbers of language-learners (as far as English is concerned the great majority) do not proceed beyond that level, then clearly the goal of easy communication with native speakers is not an appropriate goal. Yet sometimes one finds the argument put forward that, although such a goal cannot be reached, one should aim at it, in order to do as well as possible. But why not be

realistic? Why adopt a goal which - in the circumstances I have indicated, and they are very common circumstances in a number of countries, even in parts of Europe - cannot be attained?

The time has not been wasted, obviously, if good foundations have been laid and if sooner or later the learners continue. But what proportion does continue? Time has not been wasted either if there is educational value in foreign-language learning, as we assume there is in the study of history, geography, science, and so on, even at an elementary stage. And I believe there is such value, and that those who have never embarked upon the learning of a foreign language at all probably have a narrower outlook on the world and a less understanding attitude towards other peoples. But just at the moment I would like to direct attention to what many would call a more practical point: namely, the use of English as a means of communication among those who do not speak it as a native language - in fact, to English as a lingua franca. It seems to me that even if learners of English as a foreign language can do no more than communicate with other non-native speakers of English they have learned to do something well worth while. English cannot, as has many times been admitted, be considered to 'belong' only to those who speak it as a mother tongue. It is doubtless appropriate for advanced learners of English to try to speak and write as native users of English do, and to master all the idioms and intricacies of native English speech. For the majority of learners this is far too much, and is unnecessary to successful communication with non-native speakers.

What is to be hoped for is a revival, along different lines, of some of the research that underlay Basic English, now largely forgotten. Basic English laid too much emphasis on vocabulary and too little on other aspects of communication. What we need if English is to become more effective as a language of international communication is to teach to most learners - at least initially, and bearing in mind that the majority will not go on to an advanced stage - a much simpler form of English, with the emphasis on its communicative value outside native English-speaking countries and among those for whom it is not their first language.

We should abandon the idea that every learner of English must aim to speak and write more or less as an Englishman does, or as an American, a Canadian, a Welshman, an Australian, or a Scot; and we should adopt a more realistic goal. I have in mind here not merely one aspect of English, such as its pronunciation or its spelling, but the language as a whole.

How can English be simplified? Variously, as we know, since for decades past the profession has been simplifying it in at least two important ways: lexically and syntactically. Yet an underlying assumption has usually been that the learner will, or at least ought to, continue to an advanced level in due course, and the simplification has usually been associated with steps and stages, in fact with making the path to a fairly distant and, as I have suggested, an often never-to-be-reached destination less stony. The problem of reducing the total content of what is to be mastered (given that this can be mastered and no more) to proportions which are not inadequate for the type of communication I have indicated, has not yet been studied deeply enough.

Spelling reform should not be opposed, but rather supported, so long as the reform does not eliminate the regularities we already have. It is unfortunate that most spelling reformers seem to assume that the only function of spelling is to provide a one-to-one visual representation of the basic sounds (phonemes) of English, as if that were the only relevant kind of analysis of the language. But the spelling has also other functions useful to the reader, and g-h-o-t-i never did spell 'fish', in spite of Bernard Shaw. Simplification is no simple matter, and has several aspects. It should consist, I think, mainly in the non-teaching of various syntactic features that are usually taught: for instance, do we need to teach shall (except in 'offers') in addition to will, do we need the future perfect, and all the conditionals? What about the question-tags - isn't it, weren't they, didn't you, wouldn't she, won't they, must I, etc? In some parts of the world they manage with isn't it, and might we not tolerate this even if we do not teach it, in the circumstances I have described? H.V.George's thoughtful Common Errors in Language Learning (1972) is worth studying on this point. To my mind Dr J. van Ek's minimum contains far too much and

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cannot be attained, in average circumstances, in twice the teaching time (100-150 hours) we are told is needed: try making a non-alphabetical list of the grammatical inventory set out by L.G.Alexander in Appendix 2 of that book ('The Threshold Level', Council of Europe, 1975) and judge for yourselves.

To sum up: there is no one type of success in the learning of English as a foreign language, and we need to define in detail a new type of success, in terms of ability to communicate with non-native users of English, for those whom we tend to write off at present as failures. In doing this we can give a new impetus to English teaching in many places and may improve the effectiveness of English as a means of international communication.

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